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AUTHOR Imber, Steve C.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

The study was designed to examine the effect of teacher administered praise notes on the academic performance of three second grade special needs students with reading difficulty or learning disabilities. Also studied were effects of notes and their use in conjunction with parental social reinforcement. A multiple baseline procedure was used to investigate the relative effects of teacher and parent-teacher praise on the completion of independent reading seatwork. Results demonstrated significant increases in student performance as a function of written teacher praise. Additional gains were realized from systematic parental support. (Author/SBH)

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MODIFYING INDEPENDENT WORK HABITS: AN EFFECTIVE-AFFECTIVE TEACHER-PARENT COMMUNICATION PROGRAM

Steve C. Imber, Ph.D.
Rhode Island College

Ruth Imber, Ed.B.

Cary Rothstein, Ph.D.
Bangor, Maine

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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to examine the effect of teacher administered praise notes on the academic performance of second grade special needs students. Also studied were effects of notes and their use in conjunction with parental social reinforcement.

A multiple baseline procedure was used to investigate the relative effects of teacher and parent-teacher praise on the completion of independent reading seatwork.

The results demonstrated very significant increases in student performance as a function of written teacher praise. Additional gains were realized from systematic parental support.

The study utilized simple, efficient and effective procedures for helping to successfully maintain special needs students in a regular classroom setting. Limitations and implications of the research are discussed.

MODIFYING INDEPENDENT WORK HABITS: AN EFFECTIVE-AFFECTIVE TEACHER-PARENT COMMUNICATION PROGRAM [1]

Mainstreaming is having a profound effect on education across the nation. Recent federal legislation strongly encourages the placement of children with learning and behavior problems in the least restrictive educational environment. One direct result of this thrust is the increasingly important role that the regular classroom teacher plays in the prevention or remediation of serious learning and behavior problems. The magnitude of the above challenge is strikingly reflected in the recent attention the regular classroom teacher has received in the literature (Cantrell & Cantrell, 1976; Mann, 1974; Reynolds & Davis, 1971). There have been several recent textbooks written primarily for the purpose of helping the regular classroom teacher work more effectively with exceptional children (Gearheart & Weishahn, 1976; Hammill & Bartel, 1975; Kozloff, 1974; Wallace & Kauffman, 1973), and several studies have attested to the fact that exceptional children may be successfully taught in regular classrooms (Cantrell & Cantrell, 1976; Haring & Krug, 1975; Hewett, 1971).

Furthermore, there has been a concommitant increase in parent interest and involvement in helping their children succeed in school (Clements & Alexander, 1975; Feldman et. al., 1975; Flint & Deloach, 1975). To this end, several authors have recently written textbooks to aide teachers in developing and maintaining better parent-teacher relationships (Kelly, 1974; Kroth, 1975).

There are several studies supporting the efficacy of modifying academic achievement of children with behavior or learning problems in the regular classroom. Thus, Hall, Lund, and Jackson (1968) demonstrated the effectiveness of teacher attention as a positive reinforcement for appropriate classroom work. Masden, Becker, and Thomas (1968) found that regular classroom teachers could

apply behavioral principles, especially positive reinforcement, to effect a significant improvement in appropriate work habits. Similarly, McGlaughlin and Malaby (1972) increased academic assignment completion and appropriate social behavior in fifth and sixth grade children of low socio-economic backgrounds. In a number of other studies, investigators have successfully utilized behavioral modification principles in improving the quality and quantity of arithmetic seatwork in the regular classroom (Ferritor & Buckholt, 1972; Hasazi & Hasazi, 1972; Kirby & Shields, 1972).

Behavior modification procedures have also been effectively implemented in home settings (Bailey, Wolf, & Phillips, 1970; Herbert & Baer, 1972; Johnson & Katz, 1973; Tharp & Wetzel, 1969), and the past few years have yielded a number of publications written for parents on the implementation of behavioral modification procedures (Becker, 1971; Krumboltz & Krumboltz, 1972; Patterson & Gullion, 1968). While there have been some attempts to address the needs of parent-teacher communication (Ginott, 1972; Gordon, 1974), most of this literature has been directed toward children who do not have serious behavior or learning problems. Furthermore, the emphasis of these publications has been placed upon the process of communication rather than the application of behavior modification principles. There are some references devoted to helping classroom teachers work with parents of exceptional children (Kelly, 1974; Kroth, 1975). Although these references have utilized a behavioral orientation as part of their approach, no specific studies involving parents and teachers as cooperative change agents have been cited. At least two recent references can be found which specifically suggest the use of positive, written teacher notes in conjunction with parental communication as a strategy for increasing appropriate school behavior (Coloroso, 1976; Dickerson, et. al., 1973), but neither reference has supported the procedure with data.

Tharp & Wetzel (1969) have proposed a series of models which consider the potential roles of consultants, teachers, parents, and children using various types of reinforcement arrangements. It was the desire of the investigators to apply one of the Tharp & Wetzel models in a regular classroom setting; however, teacher concerns relating to the extent of necessary training, time, and expense required the formulation of a relatively simple and practical design which successfully preserved the judicious application of behavior modification principles.

It has been stated that behavior modification can provide an effective means of behavior change, but not the educational goals and specific teaching methods (Hewett, 1968; Macmillan & Forness, 1971). It should be understood that any attempt to modify a child's work habits must be based upon the virtual certainty that the assigned tasks are at an appropriate level of instruction (Haring & Phillips, 1962; Hewett, 1968). However, it should not automatically be assumed that a child who is not academically succeeding has been given inappropriate work. Hewett (1968), among others, has already noted that other variables besides the task (e.g., the classroom structure and the reinforcement) can significantly effect classroom performance. In summary, although behavior modification procedures have been proven effective in altering various types of inappropriate behavior, some legitimate concerns have been raised about the difficulty and complexity of implementing such procedures in regular classrooms (Kauffman & Vincente, 1971; Tharp & Wetzel, 1969).

This study was designed to examine the effect of teacher administered praise notes on the academic performance of three special needs second grade students. A multiple baseline procedure was utilized to study the sole effects of the notes and their use in conjunction with parental social reinforcement.

METHOD

Subjects

Three white, second grade children from a rural Northeastern school who were identified as not being able to complete their reading seatwork participated in this study. The appropriateness of each child's assigned tasks had been carefully assessed (level, number of items, time limits), and it was concluded that the assignments were suitable. Subject 1 (S 1) and subject 2 (S 2) were concurrently being seen by a remedial reading specialist; Subject 3 (S 3) worked with a learning disabilities resource teacher.

S 1, a male, was described by his teacher as having attentional deficits, frequently hurrying through his work, and usually assigning random answers to workbook questions. Upon task completion, he would frequently wander about the room. When asked if his work was finished he was quick to respond affirmatively; however, with the realization that the teacher was aware of his response style, S 1 would smile sheepishly and return to his seat.

S 2, a female, was in the same reading group as group S 1. She worked very slowly, often completing only one-third of her seatwork. The teacher described this subject as a 'daydreamer.' When the teacher attempted to increase the child's response rate, her work became very inaccurate.

S 3 demonstrated highly aberrant social and academic behavior. Occasionally, this subject would correctly complete all of his assigned seatwork, although generally, only those assignments that were of particular interest to him were completed. While this subject tended toward withdrawn and isolated behavior, he would frequently exhibit acting-out, aggressive behavior towards his peers and his teacher (e.g., temper tantrums, hitting others).

Using Breyer and Calchera's behavioral rating classification system (1969), S 1's behavior could be described as off-task, disruptive; S 2's behavior could be labelled off-task, non-disruptive; and S 3's behavior could be termed, off-task, physically disruptive.

Treatment Conditions

There were daily 75 minute reading classes, during which time each child was expected to complete several independent seatwork tasks. For the purposes of this study, each of these assignments was subdivided into items. The assignments consisted of copying poems or sentences, completing dittos, and answering workbook questions. The student's work was computed as a percentage of correctly completed items. All work was corrected and returned on the same day on which it was assigned.

The study consisted of three treatment phases: (1) baseline procedure which involved assigning and tallying the independent reading seatwork; (2) intervention 1 which required a private conference between teacher and child to praise the student for behavior which was already appropriate and to explain to the student that on days for which most of the independent reading seatwork was correctly completed, the student could expect to receive a praise note from the teacher. The children were required to accurately complete a minimum of 80% of their seatwork in order to earn such a note; (3) intervention 2 which involved teacher-parent contact by phone as well as in writing to explain the praise note program. It was suggested that although some improvement in work habits had occurred, further success might be evidenced with parental support. The parents were asked to cooperate with the program and employ a four step procedure: 1. If the child brings home a note, praise him as soon as possible; 2. Praise the child again in front of other family members; 3. Hang the note in a highly

noticeable place; 4. The following morning, mention your hope that the child might again repeat his success. It is important to note that if the child did not earn a note on a given day, his parents were instructed to state that it was too bad that the child was unsuccessful, but 'tomorrow was another day.' No punishment was to be administered. On the following morning, the parents were requested to follow step 4.

As may be noted in Table 1, the baseline and intervention periods varied for the three subjects, consequently serving as a control for spurious environmental factors.

RESULTS

Table 1 summarizes the percentage of correctly completed items for the three subjects during each of the treatment phases.

Table 1

Mean Percentage of Correctly Completed Items of Independent Reading Seatwork and Number of Praise Notes Earned During Conditions of Baseline, Intervention 1, and Intervention 2.

Subject	Baseline		Intervention 1			Intervention 2		
	# days	% items	# days	% items	# notes	# days	% items	# notes
S 1	10	49%	11	70%	4	24	79%	12
S 2	15	50%	10	78%	8	20	90%	18
S 3	24	43%	11	77%	8	9	85%	8

Subject 1

During S 1's ten days of baseline, he correctly completed 49% of his independent reading assignments. The daily completion rate ranged from 23% to 80%. The mean percentage of completed items increased to 70% during Intervention 1, with a range from 43% to 91%. Four notes were earned by S 1 during this phase of the study. S 1 continued to show improvement during Intervention 2. He received 12 notes during the 24-day period and achieved a mean score of 79%. His performance ranged from 48% to 97%. S 1's performance can be noted in Figure 1.

Subject 2

During the 15 days of S 2's baseline, 50% of the independent reading seatwork was accurately completed. S 2's daily scores ranged from 23% to 77%. Intervention 1 yielded a mean increase of 28% with a range of scores from 46% to 93%. Eight praise notes were earned by S 2 during the 14 day intervention period. During Intervention 2, this subject increased her mean performance to 90%, with a range of scores from 73% to 100%. S 2 earned 18 notes during this phase of the treatment. The results of S 2 may be observed in Figure 2.

Subject 3

During the 24 day baseline, S 3 only completed 43% of his assigned seatwork. His daily scores ranged from 0% to 90%. The eleven day Intervention 1 yielded a mean score of 77%; however, the range of scores varied from a low of 0% to a high of 100%. S 3's 34% increase in the percentage of correctly completed items was underscored with a praise note rate of 73% (i.e., 8/11). Table 1 illustrates S 3's continued improvement during Intervention 2. S 3 exhibited a mean score of 85% during the nine day period; the scores ranged from 50% to 100%. S 3 earned eight notes during this phase of treatment. Figure 3 provides a graphic illustration of S 3's performance.

Multiple Comparisons

Figure 4 provides a graphic comparison of the data for each of the subjects during the three treatment phases. It can be seen that each of the subjects showed considerable improvement during each of the intervention phases. There was a general decrease of variability for each subject during each successive treatment. Figure 4 also reveals that the subjects' performance increased in such a way that during each successive stage of treatment very few scores fell below the previously obtained mean. An important purpose in utilizing the multiple baseline procedure is to allow for a comparison of subjects who are experiencing various phases of treatment. Figure 4 permits a close examination of the three subjects during the different experimental conditions. It may be readily observed that while S 1 responded to Intervention 1, S 2 and S 3 maintained their low baseline performance levels. Similarly, while S 1 and S 2 continued to improve their rate of performance during Intervention 2, S 3 who was still in a baseline condition maintained his rate of 43%. Thus, through such a comparison it is possible to increase the likelihood that both the teacher praise notes, and subsequent parental support had the desired effect of substantially increasing each child's mean rate of performance. It should be noted that the teacher continued to provide praise notes on an intermittent basis, after the completion of the study. The students were able to maintain their high levels of performance for the remainder of the year.

DISCUSSION

This study was designed to examine the effects of teacher administered praise notes and parental back-up reinforcement on the percent of independent reading seatwork of three regular classroom students with learning and behavioral problems. The results of this study strongly support the idea that consistent

written teacher praise can produce a marked and enduring improvement in academic performance. The data provides further support for the use of parents as participants in strategies designed to improve the academic performance of their children. While each subject clearly approached the criterion of 80% correctly completed reading seatwork, the performance of these subjects during Intervention 2 lends strong support to the belief that positive and consistent parental communication can have a significant impact on their childrens' success in school.

Although the use of the multiple baseline technique greatly strengthens the above findings, there are certain limitations of this study which need clarification. It must be underscored that the success of the design would have been greatly weakened, if not neutralized, were it not true that each subject was assigned appropriate seatwork. Had this aspect not been considered, the subjects might have been greatly frustrated by a reward which was unachievable. Another factor which needs consideration is the teacher's relationship with the subjects. Even before the study was initiated, the teacher had established a basic rapport with each of the children. If such a relationship were lacking, it is very unlikely that the children would have perceived the teacher's praise notes as a reinforcer. Under less favorable circumstances, the teacher might have had to utilize free time or a material reinforcer paired with the praise notes to achieve the desired effect. One weakness of the study was that there was no assurance that the parents would follow through on the teacher's instructions. The children who participated in this study were not selected on the basis of demonstrated parental interest. There was most certainly some variation in enthusiasm and thoroughness with which the parents implemented the recommendations of the teacher, although informal questioning of the subjects revealed that there was rather consistent cooperation anong the parents. Where such cooperation proves

to be lacking, either the teacher must redefine the objectives and goals to the parents, or find another person to serve as the back-up reinforcer.

There are several implications of this investigation which merit attention. First, the study lends support to the idea that regular classroom teachers can implement basic behavioral procedures to effect positive changes in student performance. What is of greater significance is that such procedures need not be very elaborate, time-consuming, or highly sophistocated ones in order to produce substantial gains in academic performance; nor is it necessary that such procedures disrupt normal classroom routines or pupil progress.

Secondly, the investigation provides some evidence that parental involvement in behavior change interventions is not only justifiable, but that such involvement can be easily arranged without the use of elaborate training procedures.

Thirdly, the simplicity and direct relevance of the design lends itself as a possible means of staff development training to help classroom teachers learn to plan and implement basic behavioral strategies with their students who evidence learning and behavioral problems in regular classroom settings.

The study also raises some questions which might be pursued through further research: to what degree are these results generalizable to subjects' other classrooms which do not directly manipulate reinforcement variables? what effects does such a procedure have on parents' willingness to communicate with regular classroom teachers? what is the effect of such a study on parents' willingness to apply concepts of behavior modification in the home? what is the long term effect of such a study on pupil social and academic behavior? It is hoped that this research is a stimulus to further investigations of teacher-parent communication programs which attempt to improve the opportunities for success of children with behavior and learning problems in the regular classroom.

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APPENDIX A

RAW DATA

	S 1			S 2			S 3		
Day	# Items	# Right	%	# Items	# Right	%	# Items	# Right	%
1	24	12	50% B	24	10	43% B	20	5	20%
2	64	28	44%	64	39	61%	28	16	57%
3	24	12	50%	24	12	50%	21	19	90%
4	30	7	23%	30	9	30%	24	3	13%
5	27	10	37%	27	20	74%	21	0	0%
6	27	12	44%	27	8	30%	25	23	92%
7	33	22	67%	33	19	58%	4	1	25%
8	5	3	60%	5	3	60%	5	3	60%
9	5	4	80%	5	2	40%	6	4	67%
10	25	9	36%	25	12	48%	7	1	14%
11	60	53	88% I1	60	31	52%	15	2	13%
12	40	17	43%	40	17	43%	19	4	21%
13	56	49	88%	56	32	57%	10	8	80%
14	22	16	73%	22	5	23%	3	2	67%
15	35	32	91%	35	27	77%	3	1	33%
16	26	16	62%	26	12	46% I1	4	3	75%
17	29	20	69%	29	27	93%	5	4	80%
18	43	36	84%	43	35	81%	8	1	13%
19	27	13	48%	29	16	57%	14	2	14%
20	36	24	67%	36	29	81%	3	1	33%
21	31	18	58%	31	26	84%	6	1	17%
22	23	13	57% I2	23	19	83%	4	3	75%
23	36	33	92%	36	31	86%	6	1	17%
24	47	29	62%	47	39	83%	14	0	0% I
25	23	16	70%	23	19	82%	4	4	100%
26	29	14	48%	29	25	86% I2	4	4	100%
27	46	37	80%	46	39	85%	22	12	55%
28	15	14	93%	15	11	73%	7	7	100%
29	23	19	83%	23	17	74%	7	7	100%
30	51	39	76%	51	48	94%	8	8	100%
31	33	25	76%	33	31	94%	15	2	13%
32	35	33	94%	35	33	94%	12	12	100%
33	42	22	52%	42	48	90%	8	8	100%
34	41	36	88%	41	38	93%	16	15	94%
35	19	14	74%	19	17	89%	7	6	86% I
36	25	20	80%	25	15	100%	10	5	86%
37	27	25	93%	27	26	96%	10	5	50%
38	34	26	76%	34	31	91%	11	9	82%
39	35	24	69%	35	29	83%	10	8	80%
40	32	29	91%	32	29	92%	6	5	83%
41	36	28	78%	36	31	86%	12	11	92%
42	30	19	63%	30	28	93%	11	11	100%
43	32	31	97%	32	30	94%	11	11	100%
44	24	21	88%	24	24	100%	8	7	88%
45	26	23	88%	26	24	92%			

B - Initiation of baseline
I1 - Initiation of intervention 1
I2 - Initiation of intervention 2

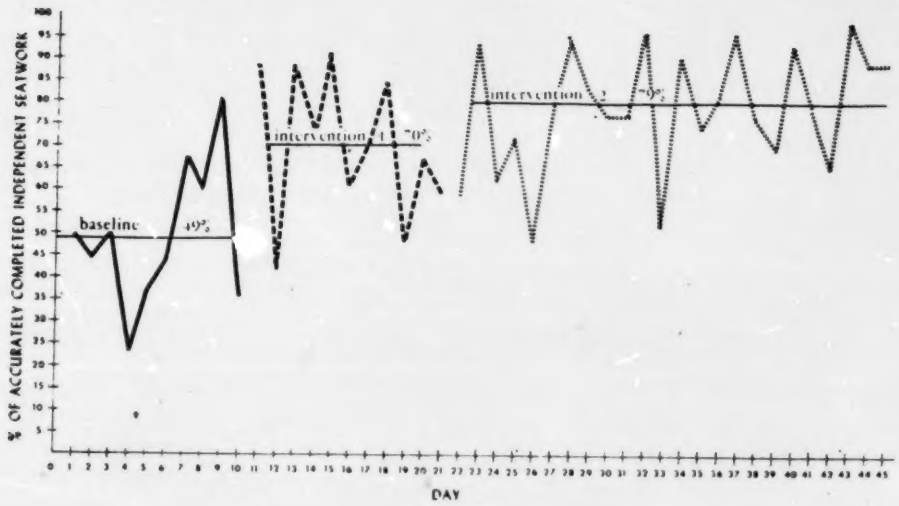

Figure 1. Percentage of accurately completed independent reading seatwork subject 1: 'Paul'

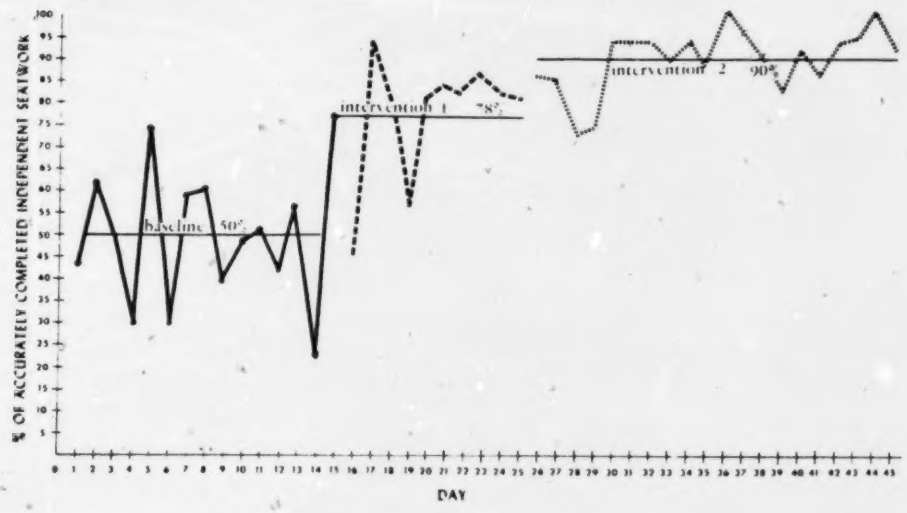

Figure 2. Percentage of accurately completed independent reading seatwork subject 2: 'Kristen'

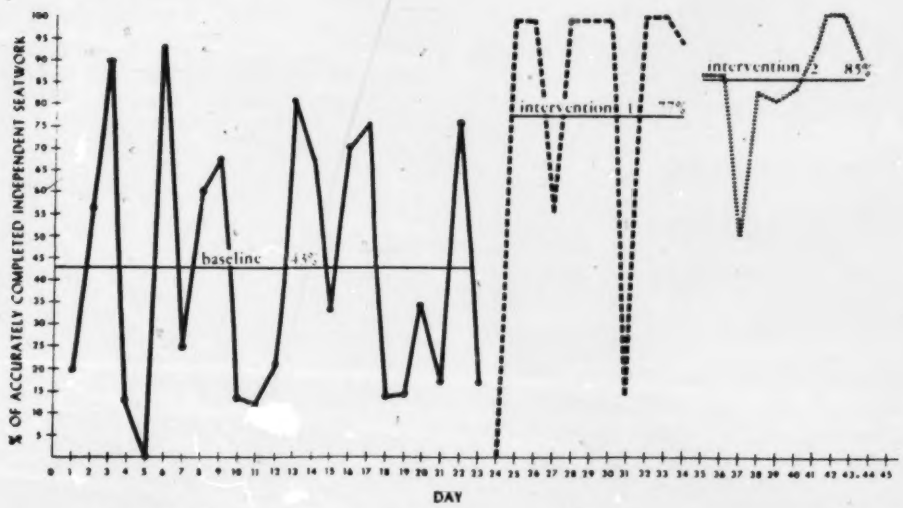

Figure 3. Percentage of accurately completed independent reading seatwork subject 3: 'Ronnie'

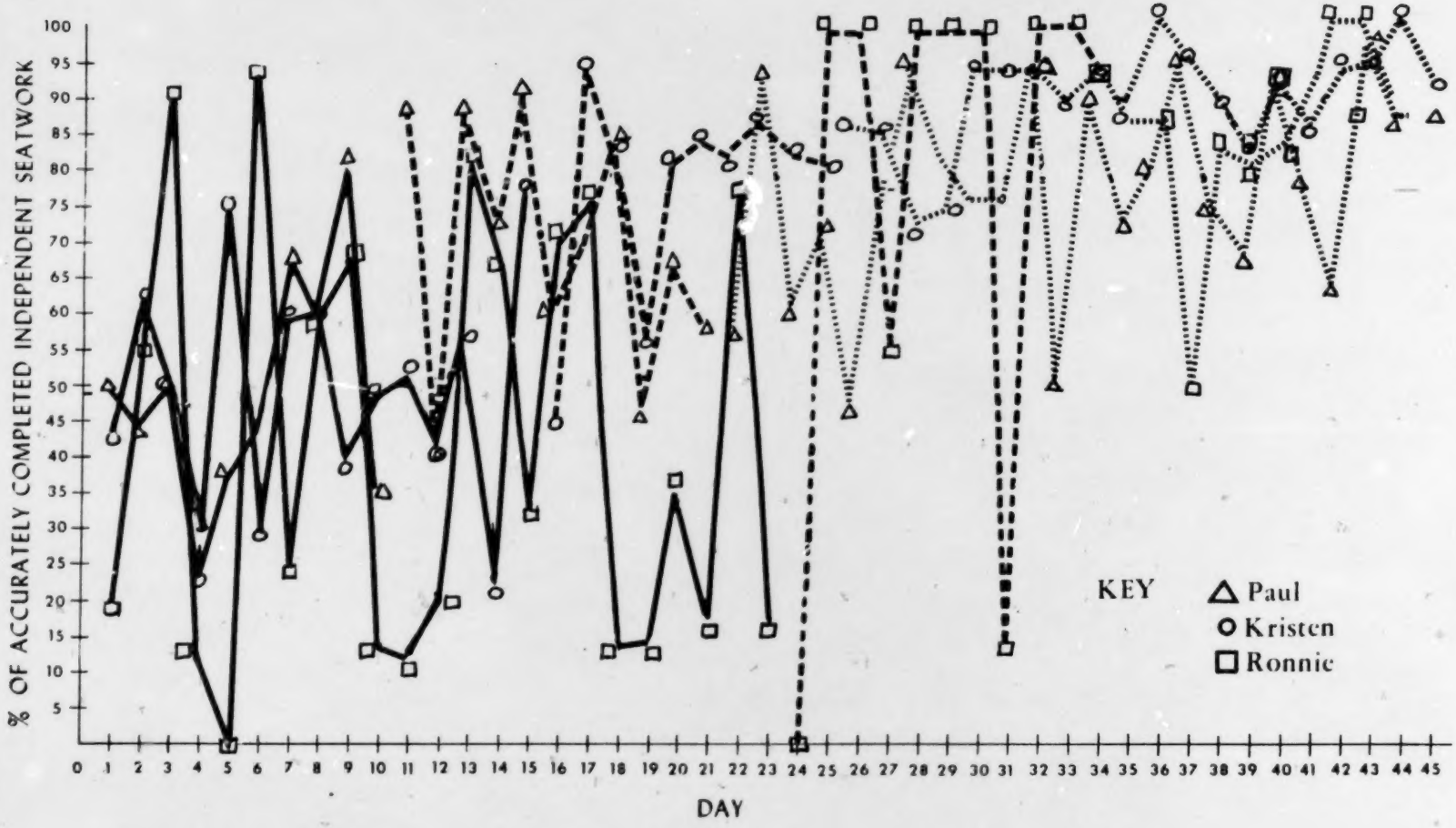

Figure 4 - A multiple baseline comparison of the effects of teacher administered praise notes on independent reading seatwork

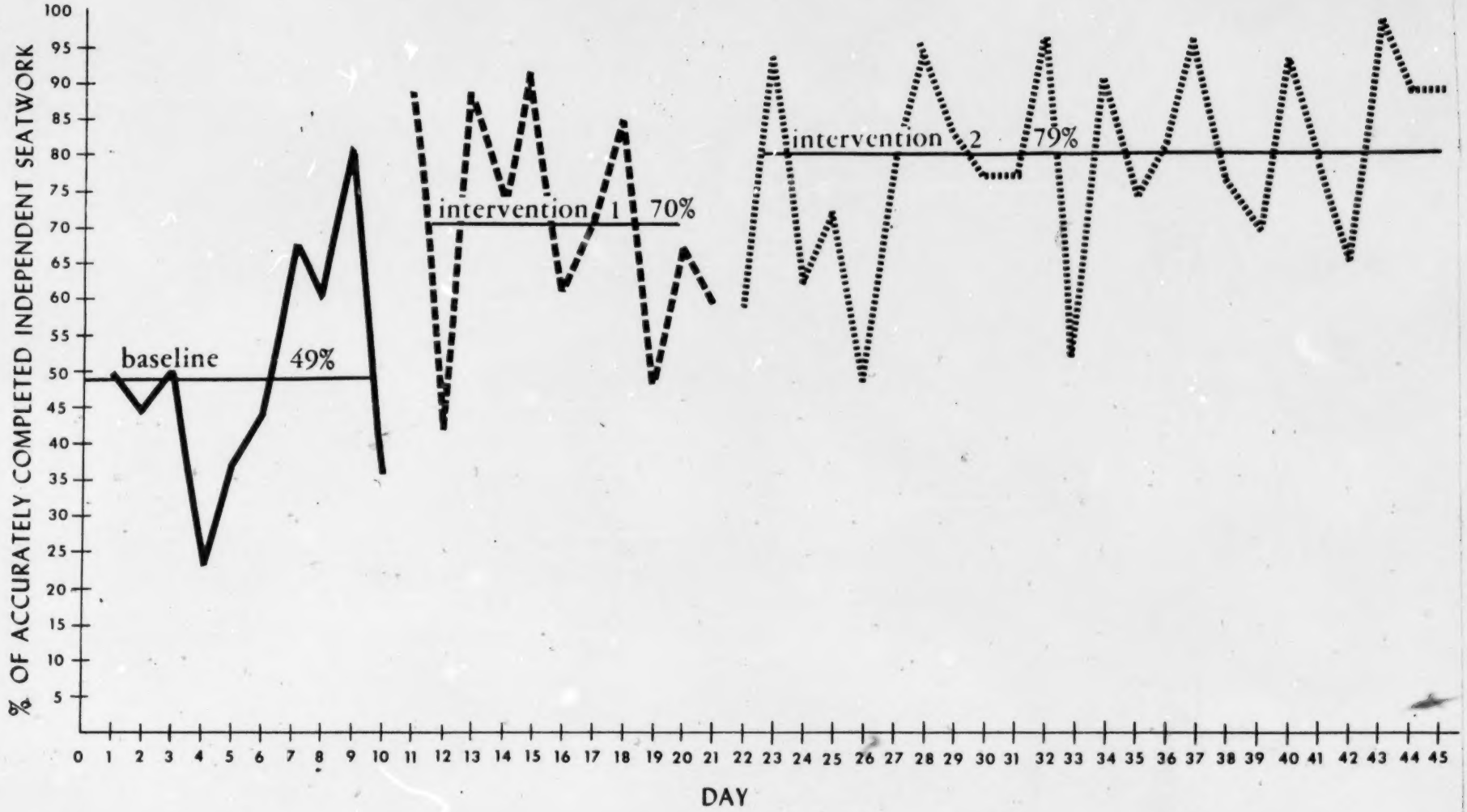

Figure 1. Percentage of accurately completed independent reading seatwork subject 1: 'Paul'

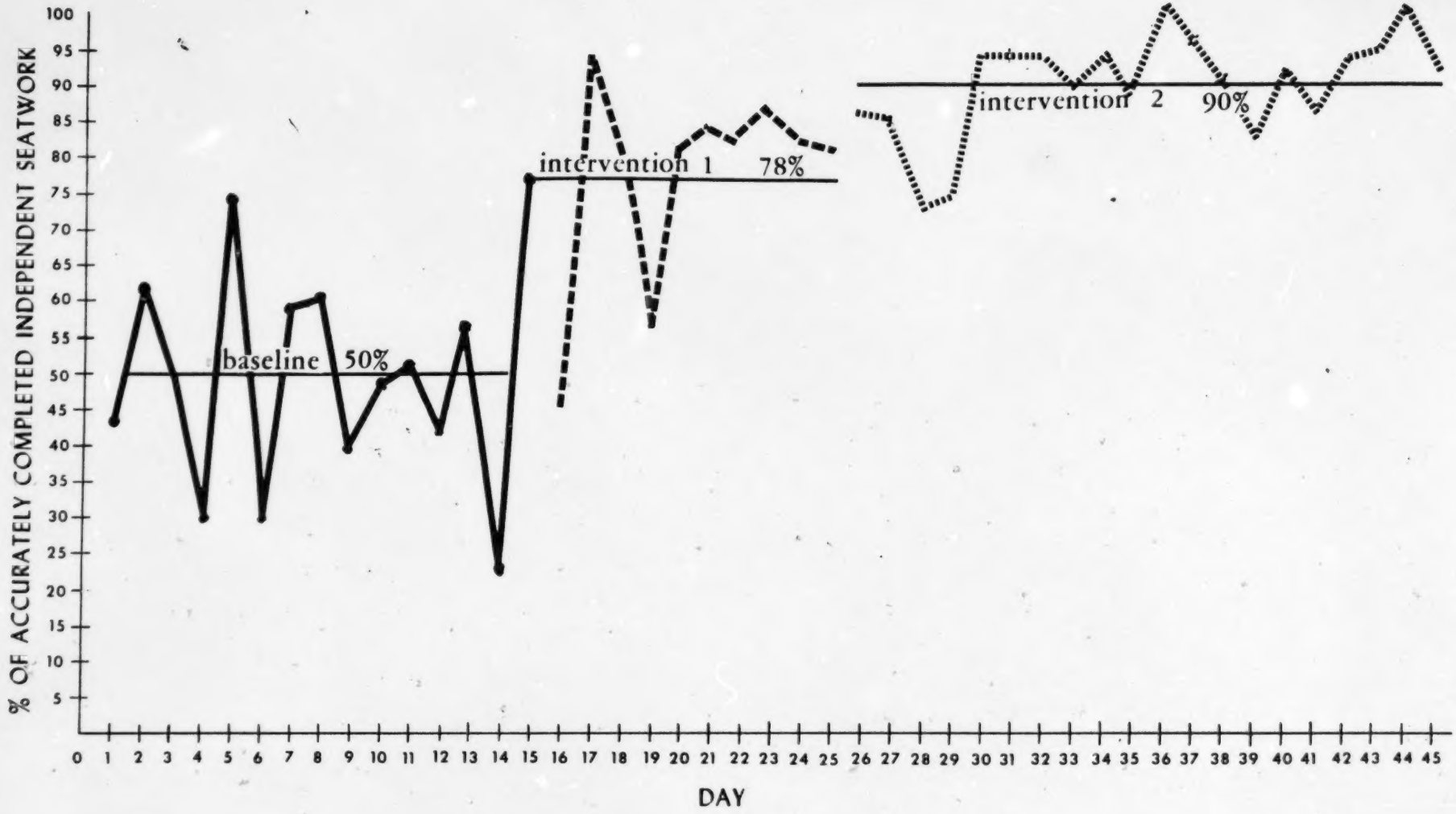

Figure 2. Percentage of accurately completed independent reading seatwork subject 2: 'Kristen'

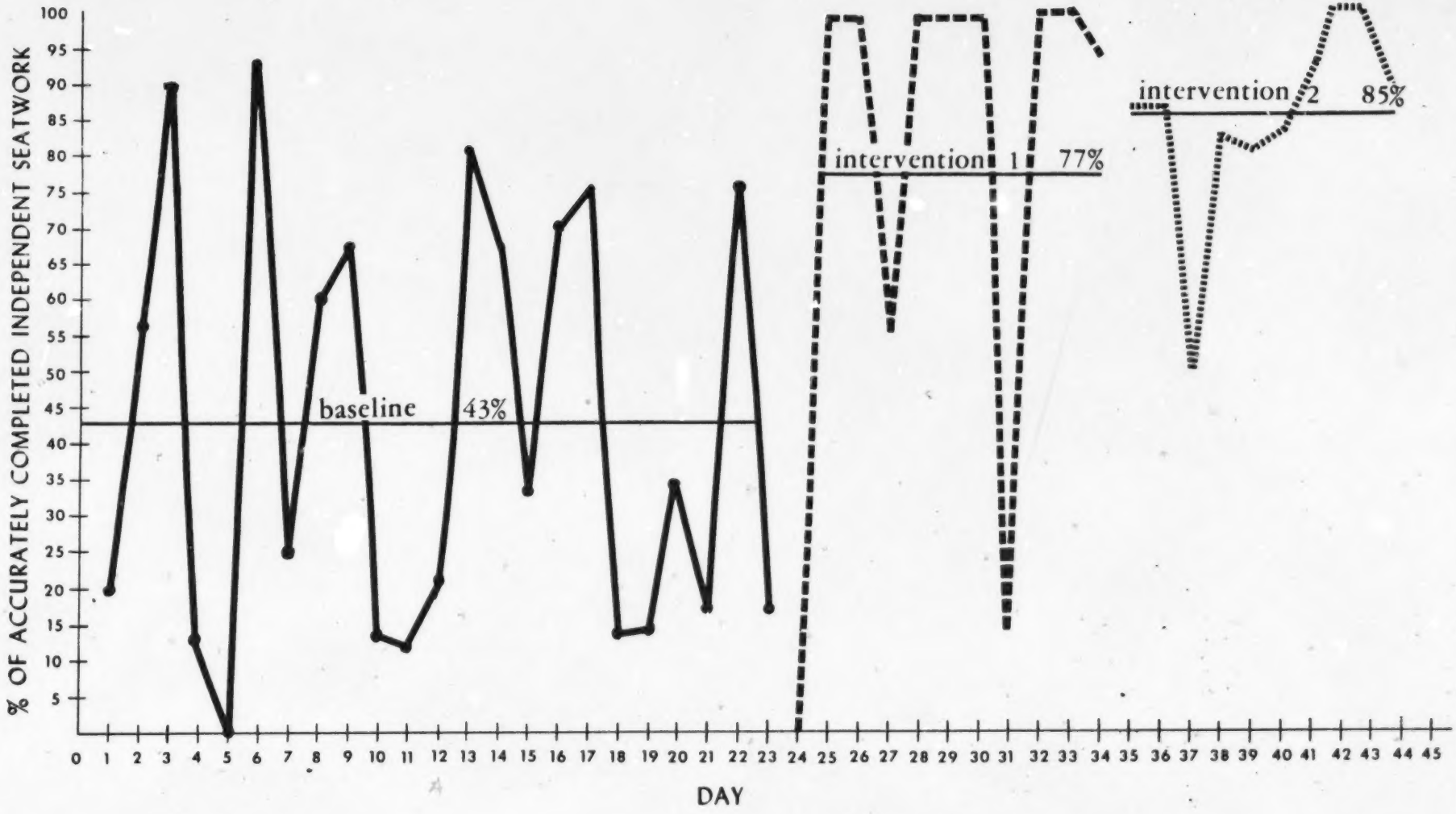

Figure 3. Percentage of accurately completed independent reading seatwork subject 3: 'Ronnie'